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AS WE WERE SAYING

Celebration of the Christmas Season

As this issue of the Quarterly rolls off the press the festive season will be upon us. Once again the ether waves will be carrying messages of goodwill to friends in town and country, and to exiles in foothill cabins and the distant fur posts of the Silent Places. As we sit around the festive board, glancing at the coloured lights on our Christmas trees and listen to the winged words that mean so much to those far off the beaten track, one's mind goes back to lonely Christmasses spent by pioneer settlers on Alberta's prairies in days gone by.

Food has always been one of the outstanding sources of Yuletide lore. Such colourful terms as "hash magrundy", "rowdy-dowdy" and "punk" were coined by western bachelors forced to improvise appropriate provender for the festive table. Not that the fare differed very much on this day of days; always, however, they added a little something by way of celebration. "Hash magrundy" was a sort of stock-pot stew. It might contain anything under the sun short of cigar stubs. It was supposed to improve, like Scotch whiskey, with age, and no respectable bachelor, homesteading on the bald-headed prairie, ever changed his stew or cleaned the pot. In fact, he deeply resented any meddling, and more than one well-meaning, weak-stomached greenhorn has come to grief by tossing out the host's "hash magrundy". The hash was a rich brown, both in

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colour and effluvia, and was distinguished after lengthy fermentation by a decidedly acrid taste. On ~~special~~ occasions, such as Christmas, something special was added to the pot. This might be a duck, a prairie chicken, a rabbit or, if times were hard and meat scarce, possibly a double handful of vegetables. The typical bachelors' Christmas dinner on the early western plains might be "hash magrundy" served with "rowdy-dowdy", ~~a~~ ~~another name for something~~ ~~xxxxxx~~ closely resembling wallpaper paste, winding up with a desert of "Punk", a fluffy bread composed of flour, raisins, baking powder and water.

This ~~delicious~~ repast constituted dinner. Breakfast on this holiday occasion was the same as that on weak days, and consisted of the inevitable porridge. To save time and trouble the enterprising bachelor would sometimes make a week's porridge at a time, and pour the whole mess into a table drawer. When breakfast time came along he'd simply sit down at the table, pull out the drawer, devour his porridge, slam the drawer back - and go to work. This cut kitchen economy to the bone.

Of course if anything went wrong with the piece de resistance it really left the bachelor in a spot. One Christmas several High River bachelors decided to pool their resources in a general celebration. Meat was short so each bachelor hunted for several days and accumulated a mixed bag of rabbits, prairie chicken, squirrels and what not which they handed to the one selected to act as cook, with orders to throw everything into a single pot. This was to be a real feed, probably the first square meal they had had for several days. Savoury odours wafted to them as they swapped yarns, and clinking ^{ED} knives and forks in preparation for the forthcoming onslaught. At last the noble stew was ready. The cook

entered, bearing proudly aloft the steaming dish of "hash magrundy"! A glad cry greeted him. And, in that moment of triumph - he stubbed his toe, fell forward on his face and sent the rich brown stew streaming across the dirt floor.

Of course the bachelors' did what they could. They crawled around the floor, every man for himself, and in the turmoil the cook managed to make good his escape!

Not every bachelor followed these culinary customs. Once in a while there'd be a fellow who'd put on a real spread. Take for instance, John Innes, the Canadian artist, who once had a ranch on the Bow River. "My first ~~winter~~ Christmas in Western Canada," he recalls, "was spent on my ranch, in a very modest little shack. Christmas day came cold and clear. I looked after the horses and chopped the wood while my partner, a dandy cook, prepared the meal. This consisted of nicely stuffed and roasted prairie chickens, rabbit mulligan, dumplings and bacon, and a big plum duff. The way we made the plum duff was to mix flour, suet and baking powder, dump in a quantity of raisins, brown sugar, ~~and~~ spice and water, throw it into a bag and boil it. With vinegar sauce it was jake. Just writing about it makes my mouth water."

In this issue there appears a short article dealing with Christmas celebrations at Fort Edmonton in the sixties, which bears a ~~remarkable~~ close parallel to similar celebrations the editor of this magazine has experienced at trading posts in the Northern section of Alberta. To-day, as in the days of the Chief ~~Factor~~ Factor Christie, dog-teams with jingling bells and fluttering standing-irons ~~hurry~~ carry Yuletide celebrants to Fort Chipewyan, Fort Mc Murray and Fort Vermillion. There is a certain nostalgia about these recollections of Yuletide in

our nearing North.

At Fort Smith, a couple of miles beyond Alberta's northern boundary, Christmas/^{was}~~ix~~ the one great event of the year. The few white women, whether living in police barracks, trading posts or cabins, decorated their homes with gay festoons and wreaths of deep green spruce boughs tied with coloured ribbons, while in a corner bore a magnificent tree with spreading branches proudly/~~xxxxx~~ its load of gifts, coloured streamers and tinsel ornaments.

Daily dog~~o~~teams arrived in the settlement until the fort was crowded to overflowing with a cosmopolitan gathering: grizzled trappers, buffalo rangers, Mounted Policemen, Slavey Indians with their squaws and children, and smiling belles of the backwoods - known to the white fraternity as "blueberry blondes". Soon there was a run on trading stores for face powder, skin bleach, and "varnishing" cream. Ere long these modern products of encroaching civilization were tripping the light fantastic in imported silk and gowns, high-heeled shoes, sheer hose - their faces pink and white masks which stood out in startling contrast to their swarthy necks.

The trails, where in ordinary times not a solitary soul would be seen, were crowded with dignified bucks in best caribou-skin parkis, beaded moccasins and buckskin mittens. Hugging heavy shawls about them to keep out the cold, comely half-breed girls in gayest colours dashed by, en route to the trading store to buy more food for ravenous visitors and their equally hungry huskies.

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Gorgeous in swallowtail coat, ^{check} ~~twink~~ cap, pink cravat, and ~~hatted~~ moccasins, his stubble beard stained with tobacco juice, Mr. Mahoney, Fort Smith's one and only butcher, was here, there and everywhere, fearful lest a single bit of backwoods gossip would escape him.

As Christmas eve wore on, and the scarlet and gold of the setting sun melted into the purple cloak of night, a crescent moon hung like a silver pendant above spiked pines in a sky encrusted with a million twinkling points of iridescent brilliance. From stovepipes and mud chimneys white spirals of smoke rose in vertical pillars till lost to sight above.

From the frosted windows of log cabins, barracks and mission, orange squares of light cast warm, rosy patterns upon the blue-white snowdrifts. So bitterly cold was it that trees now and then burst asunder with reports like cannon-shots. But no one seemed to feel the cold as they sped on moccasined feet from place to place, shouting greetings to each other, all bent on some errand of goodwill.

From without came the tinkle of sleigh bells, the door swung open and in stumbled a well-knit man with a fuzzy beard

"Mrs Godsell?" he inquired breaking the icicles from his beard, "I'm Bill Shafer, the buffalo ranger. Just got your invitation to Christmas dinner, and dropped in to say 'Bo'jou. Say- you got a piano, eh?"

"Yes," agreed Jean, "do you play."

For answer Bill straddled the piano stool as though it was a cayuse, ^{and} ~~pounding~~ ^{ED} the ivories with far from gentle hands.

Again the door swung open. This time ~~xxxxxx~~ Jimmie Donovan, with red face, squeaky voice and twinkling blue eyes, entered, admitting a billowing cloud of frosty vapour.

"Say!" he exploded, "I jest got here in time. With-
~~jest~~

drawing a huge double-barelled mouth organ from his pocket, he wiped it reverently with a ^{red} ~~red~~ bandanna, fixed a sentimental eye on the ceiling and proceeded to add to the general discord.

Thick and fast they continued to roll in till the house was filled with a cheerful, laughing throng who appeared, from their voiciferous behaviour, to have overcome prohibition difficulties and connected up with John Barleycorn. ^{MAHONEY'S} ~~Malone's~~ gaunt, swallowtailed figure moved here and there amongst, buffalo ^{Mounties} rangers, ~~traders~~ and traders, seeking out the ladies to whom he hadn't so far passed on the "news" of the day.

"De mission bell!" Hoe Lanouette's piping voice rose above the din, ~~and there came~~ clearly upon the frosty air the silvery tinkle of the mission bell.

Throwing on fur capotes, and pulling our caps about our ears, we piled the big box-stove full of wood, trooped out into the moonlight and wended our noisy, exuberant way towards the twinkling orange lights upon the hill.

What a happy, colourful gathering that was within that brightly lighted little wooden church in the very heart of the untamed wilderness! That gathering knew no colour line or creeds - for it was Christmas. There were Chief Squirrel's coppery tribesmen with their squaws and rougish-eyed youngsters; Mounted Police in red serges and glittering buttons. There were swathy Metis, French-Indian dog-drivers and runners in betasselled ~~rainx~~ caribou-skin capotes and beaded leggins; soutaned priests; nuns, tredars, trappers and buffalo-rangers. From the altar, ablaze with tall caribou-grease candles came the tinkle-tinkle of a little bell as Monseigneur Breynat, Apostle of the Mackenzie, gave Midnight Mass to his adherents.

Hardly had the Christmas sun risen ~~maximaxxing~~ like a ball of fire above the snow-laden pines next morning than the

house was invaded by a tidal wave of coppery humanity led by Chief Squirrel and old Dene Goulet, all clad in their best skin parkies and beaded moccasins; squaws and children smiling from ear to ear. For a riotous two hours they were entertained with cakes, pies and copious draughts of steaming tea, then all at last departed and Jean heaved a sigh of relief.

By seven o'clock that evening the house was full again. Around long tables covered with snow linen and glittering sat the Mounted Police boys: Burstall, Woods, Halliday and Blake; Bill, the pianist of the night before, Jimmie of the squeaky voice, Mickey Ryan and a score of others from the forests of Alberta to the edge of the Barrens. Indistinctly visible through the aromatic steam arising from a gigantic golden turkey, hauled five hundred miles by dog-sled, Vic Ingraham flourished a pair of shining carvers, while I did likewise at the other table. The rosy glow of candlelight shon dimly on the glinting tomahawks, beaded scalp-shirts and stone-headed peace pipes decorating the walls.

Suddenly "Shovel-Face" MacPherson, dusky demimondaine - so named by the Police boys on account of her overwhelming lack of pulchritude - breezed in, much the worse for drink. For a moment she surveyed us with a belligerent frown. "Shay, Mrs. Goshell," she hiccoughed, "egscuse me.... hic!.... I've b'in drinkin' Lhisterine an' I'm a l'il tight. Have you sheen my damn falshe teesh?"

The burst of uncontrollable laughter which greeted this unseemly request only caused the inebriated lady to increase an inch in stature.

"No" laughed Jean, "I haven't."

Well," she growled accusingly, "I had 'em in my mouf when I visited you last night and brought you dem dam moccasins for Christmas present. Funny - I ain't got 'em now!"

Meanwhile Big Simon; " her Cree escort, was rummaging among the cushions on the sofa, an apologetic grin bisecting his ~~xxx~~ dusky visage. Suddenly he held aloft a set ~~xxx~~ of grinning molars. With a gurgle of delight the toothless Liza grabbed them, clicked them into her mouth and bolted for the door flinging a parting "Marry Christmas" over her shoulder.

Dinner over, a rapid volley of musket shots from Joe Lanouette's "hotel" signalled that the ball of the year was under way. The large room with its rough log walls was dimly lighted with swinging-coal-oil lanterns while on a flag-perspiring draped packing case two dusky/Pagninis sawed industriously away on violins, their ~~xxx~~ moccasined feet thumping to the squealing strains of the music. Three deep around the room stood and squatted Indians, squaws and trappers, the centre of the floor being occupied by a crowd of whooping, swaying red men and their squaws going through the intricacies of the Eightsome Reel under the direction of the caller off:

"Lady round lady and gent don't go,
And lady round gent, and gent don't go.
Birdie fly out and hawkie fly in,
Then hawkie fly out and give birdie a swing.

Swinging madly came the din and dust of a wild melee, and out of the fracas the commanding voice piped cheerily again:

"Ladies bow low and gents bow under;
Couple up tight and swing like thunder."

And swing like thunder they did, until there came the wild turmoil of the break-down, the floor-boards creaking beneath the strain of two-score pounding feet.

"Jump straight up and never come down,
 An' swing your caloco roun' and roun'.
 You know where, and I don't care,
 Place your baby in a high arm/chair."

With a tumultuous rush the perspiring two-^{hundred}~~hundred~~ pound "babies" were escorted to the wall by the dusky "Gents" and dumped unceremoniously upon the floor.

With wild enthusiasm dance followed dance: The Eightsome Reel, the Rabbit Dance, Drops o' Brandy, the Handkerchief Dance, and the inevitable and rhythmic Red River Jig. Then came a midnight supper of baked beaver, moose ribs, bannock and strong black tea to revive flagging energies. Hardly was the meal disposed of than ~~the~~ moccasined feet again beat a tattoo on the wooden floor. Not till the first blush of dawn appeared in the eastern sky and stars commenced to dim did the dance break up. For a week the fun continued, winding up with with a rousing celebration on New Year's Day. Ochee- or "Kissing Day" may-keesikow, the Crees and Metis called it, when every dusky lady from rougish eyed girls of fifteen to leathery faced crones of a hundred summers ~~all expected~~ expected each and every personable male to salute them with an osculatory carress. Then one by one, trappers, buffalo-rengers and Indians hitched up their dogs teams, loaded their things on their toboggans and struck ^{out} ~~not~~ along snowy trails for wilderness cabins. And there, amongst snow-laden pines, around roaring campfires and wigwam hearths, they would talk for many months to come of the Christmas doings at Fort Smith.

During ~~the~~ construction days, when the Canadian Northern and the Grand Trunk were pushing steel tentacles through the rock-cuts and morasses of the Yellowhead Pass a ~~law was enacted~~ ~~forbidding~~ making an area bordering the track for five miles